

Trust in People and Conservatism of Family and Gender Roles in Hungary and in Some Other European Countries¹

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ABSTRACT

In this research, we wanted to find the connection between level of trust and modernity or traditionalism of gender roles in Europe, considering its various cultural backgrounds and family traditions. In keeping with the hypothesis, the level of trust and the modernity of gender and family roles varied greatly among the analysed countries. In general, the levels of trust and traditionalism were correlated within each country.

Our hypothesis regarding the connection between modernity and level of trust by region was partly proven. Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands showed high levels of both trust and modernity. Spain and the United Kingdom were in the middle. On the other end of the scale, Greece, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary showed traditional gender roles and low levels of trust. In Ukraine, the level of trust was higher than expected, but traditional attitudes to gender and family roles were rather strong.

The main aim of this analysis was presenting the phenomenon of “familism” in Hungary (and other Central-Eastern

European countries) with the help of empirical data. The analysis of trust in institutions and of gender- and family-related attitudes can help reach a basic understanding of why is there a sharp inconsistency between attitudes and actual behavior in Hungary.

INTRODUCTION

The change in family forms in Hungary over the past fifty, and especially the past twenty years, has been well documented by recent demographic and sociological studies (See e.g., Pongrácz, Molnár, and Dobossy 2001; Pongrácz and Spéder 2003; Spéder 2005; Utasi 2003). Marriage, to give an example, has changed from being the only acceptable and “normal” way to form an intimate partnership to being merely one—though still the most typical—option. Even just two decades ago, in the views of most people, cohabitation was acceptable only under special conditions (e.g., obvious material interest in the case of widowed people) and was seen as an embodiment of an unsettled, lumpen way

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of life. Marriage at an early age was part of the standard(ized) life course that was underpinned, at the time, by both material interests and social norms.

However, as of today, not only has cohabitation become popular among young adults in Hungary, but other previously unknown family types (such as “living apart together,” [occasionally multiple] remarriage, and young people living without steady partners for long periods of time) have also emerged. These phenomena have all come to be considered social problems by researchers, policymakers, and ordinary Hungarians alike.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the above trends, the results of various attitude surveys—including domestic and international comparative inquiries—all highlight the continuing existence of strong family- and child-centeredness in Hungary. They moreover demonstrate a high public opinion regarding marriage. Hence, it appears that the majority of Hungarians are struggling with the following contradiction: while desiring to conform to a family model prevalent in an earlier historical era and still viewed as ideal, they have, in fact, produced a polychromatic (heterogeneous) family typology, just like those seen in other similarly developed societies at the beginning of the 21st century. Though it is nothing new to observe an inconsistency between attitudes and actual behaviors, the extent of this discrepancy in present-day Hungary is remarkable indeed. Most researchers explain this discrepancy with reference to the financial and economic conditions of Hungarians and accordingly suggest that demographic behaviors could be realigned with prevailing attitudes and values by implementing more family-friendly tax and welfare and employment policies. Nonetheless, the same discrepancy can be approached from different angles

too. In a previous article (Tóth and Dupcsik 2007), we argued that this discrepancy could be explained with reference to traditions and culture. While real behavior has modernized, attitudes and values remain conservative because of the presence of “familism” (see below) in contemporary Hungarian society. The present study aims to help reveal and elaborate this phenomenon.

FAMILISM AND TRUST

The analysis put forth in this study is based on the concept of *familism*. Familism is a complex, polysemantic (multi-vocal) term that features in the international literature alternatively as *familism*, *familismo*, or *Familismus*. It is often translated into Hungarian as “family-centeredness” (*családközpontúság*), a term that pertains to a value system or system of attitudes. This interpretation, however, can be misleading, since familism can refer to an ideology as well as a social condition.

Familism as an ideology emphasizes the outstanding importance of the family and family relations for individuals as well as society as a whole. On the one hand, the family as a social unit in which relations are fully based on solidarity and altruism provides a sort of ideal (though rather unattainable) model for other social institutions. On the other hand, family is viewed as the most important contributor to the cultivation of prosocial behavior, social solidarity, and the attitudes that come to shape society. Those who use familism in this sense regard individualism—or to be more precise, ideologies and behaviors viewed as individualistic by the proponents of familism—to exemplify an “abnormal” anti-family ideology.

Familism as a social condition seems to prevail in societies characterized by low

social trust, where family relations are seen as the only thing individuals can trust. More precisely, familism as a social condition does not derive from the intrinsic strength of family relations and family-friendly attitudes, but rather from their *relative* strength in a context where other social institutions are weak, partial, constrained, and/or constantly destabilized by mutual distrust between participants. Those who use the term *familism* in this sense often regard it as a *synonym* of egoism and individualism (Fukuyama, 1997). Generally speaking, this kind of familism appears where civil society is weak and there is a long history of state centralization. The most frequently mentioned examples of familism in this context are southern Italy, France,² China, and more recently the post-communist countries (Papp 2000; Torsello 2004).

In the present study, we are looking for empirical evidence of whether there is an effective correlation between social distrust and conservatism concerning family and gender roles. The ESS (European Social Survey) international database makes it possible to compare Hungarian data with those from other countries in the Eastern European region as well as other European countries with different cultural backgrounds. By conducting such comparisons, we aim to prove that beyond the existence of familism in terms of actual family-centeredness (which we do not discuss in the present study), familism that arises from a deficit of social trust also exists in Hungary. We wish to show that this latter factor acts as a partial driver of the apparently conservative values detected in attitude surveys.

HYPOTHESES

As mentioned above, according to the relevant literature, *familism* and level of social trust are interrelated. By utilizing the ESS's second survey dataset, we aim to make clear whether it is possible to empirically identify the existence of this correlation in the case of European countries in different regions with various traditions and backgrounds. The hypotheses for our analysis are the following:

1. The average level of trust in people will differ by country and region. It will be highest in the Scandinavian and Western European countries, and will be lowest in Eastern European countries. In Central Europe and the Mediterranean countries, it will have an in-between value. We expect that in the case of Hungary, the level of social trust will be close to that for the Eastern European region overall—in other words, a rather low value.
2. The formation of traditional or modern attitudes concerning the family and gender roles will bear a consistent relationship with the level of social trust. Traditional attitudes concerning family roles in Hungary are among the strongest among the investigated countries. Consequently, in regional and national contexts, social distrust and traditional family values go together, just as higher trust and modern family conceptions do.
3. It can be pointed out within each country that people with a low level of trust tend to show rather traditional attitudes concerning gender roles.

²As Fukuyama (pp. 163–182) argues, the level of family-centredness is not as high in France as in Italy, but the relative strength of the family and the lack of intermediate organizations between the state and families make France a special example of familism.

ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

In our analysis, we use the ESS's second survey dataset. We select two countries from each region in which to test our hypotheses: Finland and Sweden from the Scandinavian region, Greece and Spain from the Mediterranean region, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands from the West European region, Ukraine and Poland from the Eastern European region, and Hungary and Slovakia from the Central European region. Unfortunately, no ESS data is available on Italy, although the reference literature regards Italy as one of the classical example of familism.

Among the ESS variables relevant to questions of *trust*, we focus on data concerning trust in *people*. It goes without say-

ing that the questions concerning trust in *institutions* are also important, but in this study we consider it more vital to investigate the weaknesses and strengths of direct human relations. We compare the data concerning *trust* with those regarding *attitudes* in relation to family and gender roles and then investigate the specific relationships of the two in the aforementioned countries.

TRUST IN PEOPLE: THREE QUESTIONS

“General trust in people” was measured with three questions in the ESS questionnaire. The variable called “People are decent in general” reached the highest average score of the three in each country, implying that respondents

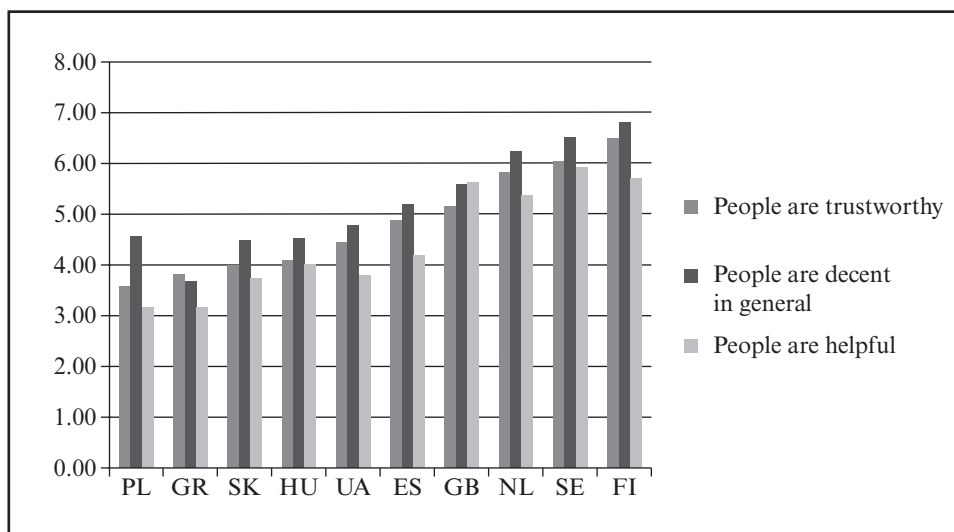


Figure 1: The average score for “General trust in people” by country (scores from 0 to 10).

trust that they will not be deceived by others more than they trust in other aspects of interpersonal relations. The respondents show least trust in people's readiness to help, and the average score for general trust falls in between. The distribution of the responses in the United Kingdom and Greece differs from that in the other countries in that the British show more trust in people's readiness to help while the Greeks, low in trust overall, produce the highest scores for general trust.

TRUST IN PEOPLE: THE AGGREGATED VARIABLE OF TRUST

We create an aggregated variable named "Trust in people" from the three existing variables (questions) by summing their scores. The score range of this new variable is between 0 and 30. Lower scores indicate lower levels of trust, while higher scores express higher levels of trust. Figure 2 shows the average scores of the ten investigated countries according to this new aggregated variable.

Average "Trust in people" scores are very different across the investigated countries. In accordance with our first hypothesis, we find the highest level of trust in the Scandinavian and Western European countries (Finland: 19.9, Sweden: 18.6; the Netherlands: 17.9). Unpredicted by our hypothesis, the two Mediterranean countries showed a huge difference. While the average score was 15 in the case of Spain, it was only 11.3 in the case of Greece—the lowest score among the ten investigated countries. These data suggest that Spain has modernized very fast in terms of values and attitudes (this can be seen in other attitude surveys too, including the International Social Survey Program—ISSP datasets) but we cannot explain the difference between the two countries. The Central and Eastern European countries also do not show universal features. For instance Ukraine reached a higher score of trust (13.7), topping both Hungary (12.8) and Slovakia (12.6). This result denies our first hypothesis about the monolith structure of trust by European regions.

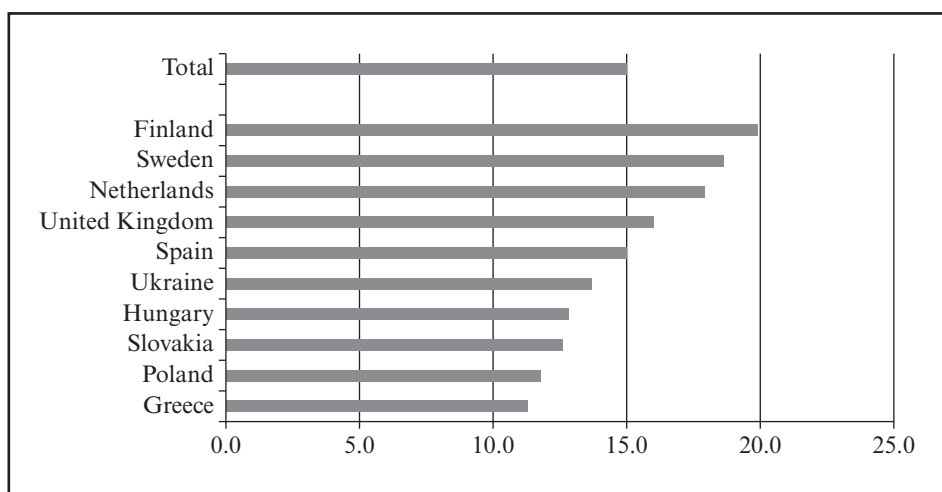


Figure 2: Average scores of the aggregated variable "Trust in people" (created from the three trust questions) by country.

TRUST AND TRADITIONALITY CONCERNING FAMILY ROLES: THREE QUESTIONS³

Concerning the statement above (that a woman should sacrifice gainful employment on behalf of the family if need be), it is not yet possible to point out in each country the correlation of modern gender and family attitudes and a (relatively) high level of trust. Our hypothesis regarding the correlation of the two, however, can be verified in the case of countries such as Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands, which are typically *modern* according to survey responses, as well as in the cases of Slovakia, Greece, Spain, and Poland. In Hungary, there is no significant correlation between the acceptance of the above statement and the level of trust. Only in Ukraine is the acceptance of the

above statement stronger than in Hungary. Unsurprisingly, Hungarian respondents give less importance to women's employment than their engagement in family tasks, regardless of the relative level of trust.

The statement in Figure 4 encapsulates the traditional conception that the man is the breadwinner and that consequently, in times of economic crisis, men must be given priority in the job market. The acceptance of this statement is quite different in the respective countries under study. Most respondents in the Scandinavian and Western European countries as well in Spain strongly disagree with it. Hungary proves to be the most conservative country here, which may reflect the traditional attitudes of Hungarians concerning gender roles. The acceptance of the assumption that "the male is the breadwinner"—with an average score of

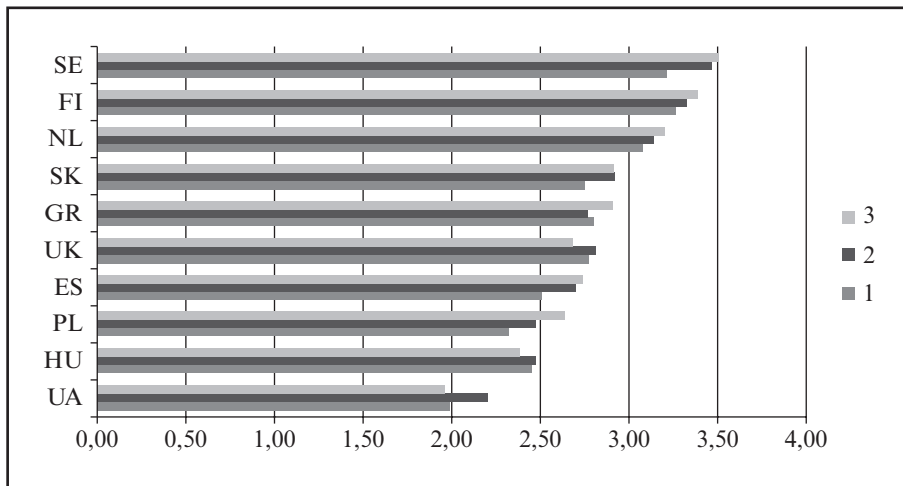


Figure 3: Average scores concerning the statement "Woman should be prepared to cut down on paid work for sake of family," broken down by country and level of trust. (1 = low level of trust; 2 = average level of trust; 3 = high level of trust.)

³Scoring of the attitude questions goes from 1 to 5. The higher is the code, the higher is the refusal of the statement.

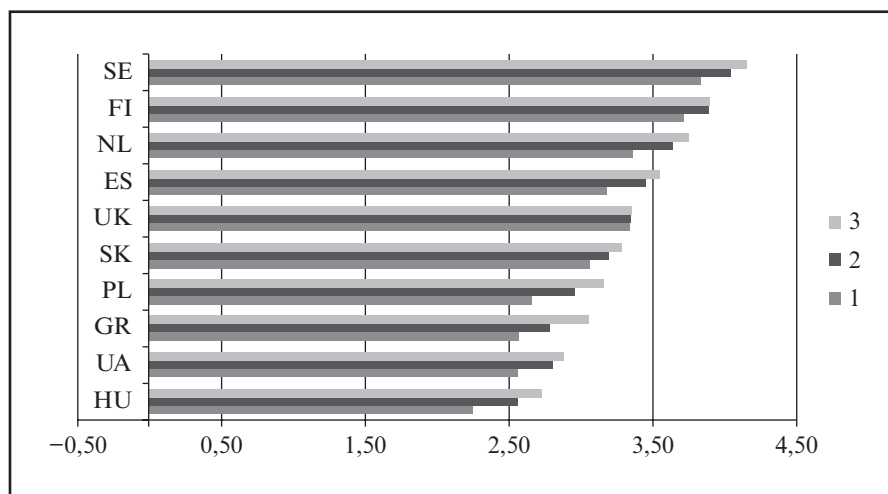


Figure 4: Average scores concerning the statement “Men should have more right to jobs than women do when jobs are scarce,” seen by country and level of trust. (1 = low level of trust; 2 = average level of trust; 3 = high level of trust.)

approximately 2.5 (indicating a low level of modernity with regard to this question, as opposed to an average score of about 4 in Scandinavian countries)—proves to be even stronger in Hungary than in the other post-communist countries. The correlation between traditionalism/modernity and level of trust in each country is consistent with our hypothesis. People with a high level of trust show significantly more modern attitudes, in all countries. It is worth noting that the average score of people with the highest level of trust in Hungary is only slightly higher than the average score of people with the lowest level of trust in Poland, for example.

The general opinion regarding divorce in the case of couples with children is usually more traditional than opinions on other issues relating to family and gender roles. In each country, respondents more or less agree that couples with children should attempt to stay together even if they do not get along. Concerning this

question, Hungary proves to be more accepting—or more “modern”—than is the case with other family-related questions. The high number of divorces in Hungary is paralleled by a high acceptance of divorce, showing relative coherence between behaviors and attitudes. It is known from other comparative surveys (e.g., the ISSP) that divorce is a widely accepted tool for “solving” family conflicts in Hungary. In fact, it has often been suggested that couples’ conflict-resolution ability in Hungary is weak in general, and thus that they immediately look to divorce as *the* solution whenever a relationship goes wrong. (Tóth 1997) Regarding the data in Figure 5, one can see a correlation between modernity and level of trust only in the case of countries in the middle range (Spain, Slovakia, and Poland). This stands in agreement with our third hypothesis. In the countries that most strongly accept or reject this statement, no kind of correlation could be verified.

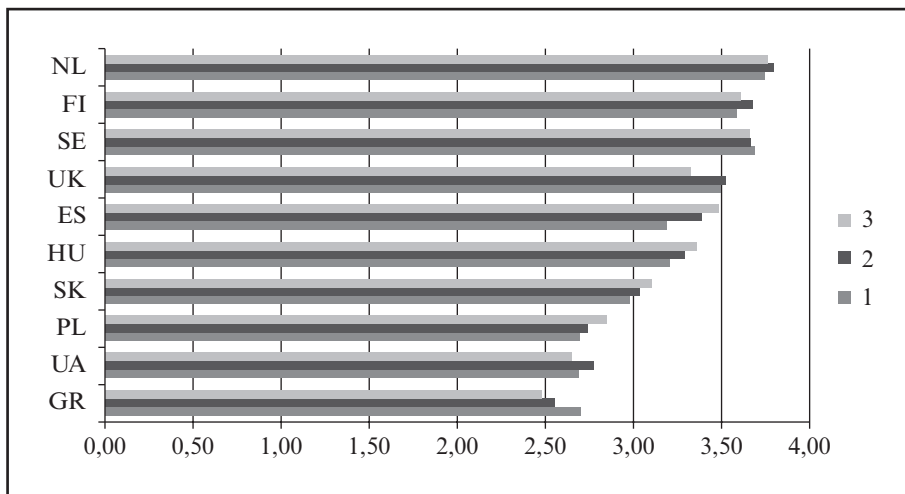


Figure 5: Average scores concerning the statement “If children are in the home, the parents should stay together even if they don’t get along,” seen by country and level of trust. (1 = low level of trust; 2 = average level of trust; 3 = high level of trust)

CONCLUSIONS

In the present analysis, we investigated whether there is a correlation between level of social trust and traditionalism or modernity of attitudes concerning gender roles in various European countries having different cultural backgrounds. The countries in our analysis manifested different levels of trust in a relative order that more or less corresponded to our preliminary expectations. The modernization of values in the case of Spain that can be seen in our data can be gleaned from other data too, while Ukraine showed a higher level of trust than expected.

Our hypothesis concerning consistency between level of trust and traditionalism by region was partly verified. Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands showed a high level of trust and modern attitudes towards family roles. Spain and the United Kingdom assumed a position in the middle of the scale in terms of both level of trust and modernity. Ukraine, in contrast, showed a

relatively high level of trust alongside rather traditional attitudes concerning family roles. At the other end of the scale, in Greece, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, low level of trust was consistent with a conservative attitude towards family roles in general.

Within countries, levels of trust and traditionalism were generally interrelated. As regards the statement “The male is the breadwinner,” this hypothesis was verified for *each* country, while the two other hypotheses were verified only in the *majority* of countries. Peculiarly, level of trust was not correlated with modern attitudes in the case of extremely conservative countries (Hungary and Greece).

The main purpose of this analysis was to point out the existence of *familism* as a social condition, primarily in the case of Hungary but also in other countries in the same region. In any case, there is a need for further investigation that draws in other variables and applies more complex statistical processes, since the verification of our

hypotheses was only partially successful. The analysis of trust in institutions and of other attitudes concerning family and gender roles may help us get a better understanding of why there is such a huge gap between attitudes and real behavior in Hungary.

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